



Optimizing Sales Operations

The Key to Repeatable Revenue Growth





The Sales Operations Secret

Sales operations is the glue that holds your revenue engine together. When you have an effective sales operations function, you know it. It reflects in the numbers, in smoother interdepartmental relationships, in your overall peace of mind because you know your sales team is performing to or above expectation. In short, if your sales operations function is not a major force driving revenue and saving costs for your company, there is something wrong.

Many sources including the Harvard Business Review report that top performance in sales teams can be traced back to sales operations.¹ And yet, in many organizations this critical function is either non-performing or entirely absent.

In this paper we examine what an effective sales ops function entails, as well as the value it provides to CEOs and top management alike. For those that may not have a mature sales operations function, we provide recommendations for getting started.

¹ Vierterl, Michael, David Sprengel, Sebastian Kuchler, and Jochen Ulrich. "In the Best Sales Teams, About Half of the People are in Support Roles." *Harvard Business Review*, May 25, 2016. Accessed June 4, 2018. <https://hbr.org/2016/05/in-the-best-sales-teams-about-half-of-the-people-are-in-support-roles>

Turbocharging Your Sales Department



While sales operations works with every aspect—inside and out of your organization—that touches sales, by definition its main involvement is with the sales function itself. Their mission is tightly aligned with the goals and objectives of the sales team, ultimately increasing revenue by supporting the team and the process.

Turbocharging Your Sales Department

Leadership

You have a fantastic VP of sales. In fact, the only way you can imagine making them more valuable to your organization is if you could clone them. Unfortunately, it's physically impossible for them to be everywhere at once.

Or is it?

Call it anything from “working seamlessly together” to “sharing a brain”, the level of communication and trust between a VP of sales and the sales operations lead is such that Sales Ops effectively becomes your VP's additional pair (or multiple pairs) of hands to manage the team and ensure deadlines and deliverables are met.

Extra hands are invaluable considering the million things your VP is juggling at any one time. Each of these responsibilities is crucial and require your VP's knowledge and expertise. However—and this is huge—not all of them absolutely require their physical presence. So, when your VP has to fly off to meet a high-profile prospect, the sales ops manager can, for example, run the weekly sales meeting, asking the questions your VP would have asked and capturing all the information your VP will need.

The list is endless. Sales Ops ensures that the VP's strategic plans—whether for new market penetration or sales growth—are constantly managed to implementation, and, of course, monitors the sales team's performance, enabling a faster reaction from the VP when high-level issues arise.

When a CEO needs sales data (which may be a rare ask, as Sales Ops excels at ensuring that all information flows upwards as a matter of course), numbers are ready, interpreted and at the VP's disposal, so that executive report that would have taken days to prepare is ready within hours.

Individual reps

Your top sales reps are a driven lot, their brain firmly locked in ‘sell’ position. This makes them great at driving in business, but often distracts them from other responsibilities. With Sales Ops backing them up, your sales team can concentrate on their top priorities (such as late-stage closing activities, which is estimated at 30% harder now than it was 2-3 years ago²), free from worry that anything could fall through the cracks.

“The top-performing sales organizations have roughly the same share of customer-facing support as their peers (30%) but twice the share of operations and administrative support (27% in top companies versus 12% in their peers).”³

Part of the way Sales Ops provides backup is chasing. Sales Ops knows where all salespeople are at all times, both geographically and within their sales cycles. When a sales ops person notices that something hasn't moved on the forecast, they will pick up the phone and find out why. When a full report will be needed for Monday's executive meeting, the sales ops person will proactively hunt down and compiled reports from all sales reps by noon on Friday.

Your sales operations team also makes it their mission to find long-term solutions to issues that pull sales reps away from selling. This includes automating aspects of the sales process, helping with paperwork, and reminding everyone about critical milestones in the lifecycle of a deal.

² An, Mimi. “State of Inbound 2018.” HubSpot Research Global Report. Accessed June 4, 2018. <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/53/assets/hubspot.com/research/reports/State%20of%20Inbound%202018%20Global%20Results.pdf?t=1529107818309>

³ Viertler, Sprengel, Kuchler, and Ulrich. “In the Best Sales Teams, About Half of the People are in Support Roles.”

The Big Paper Elephant in the Room

Perhaps everyone knows that salespeople hate paperwork. Administrative tasks keep them from doing what earns them commissions—and your company revenue. You get this and may even sympathize, but you also get that paperwork is an inevitable part of their job. However, research shows that most C-level executives vastly underestimate how much time their sales reps spend on manual tasks. Of those surveyed, 85% believe their sales force spend less than an hour a day on paperwork, when in fact, more than a quarter of salespeople spend at least an hour a day on data entry, with almost one in 10 spending more than two hours a day on manual tasks.⁴

It will come as no surprise that time spent on busywork is far more likely to occur in a company without a sales ops team.

Four ways sales ops keeps manual tasks from cutting into sales time

1

Facilitating interdepartmental communication

Every department has a job to do and your sales operations team works to make sure that goals are achieved with as little disruption to sales as possible. Say, for example, that your finance department has come up with a new process for when sales closes a deal. This new process requires the rep to go to four different places and fill in six different forms. Before your sales team can stage a mutiny, Sales Ops has already sat down with Finance to say “I understand what you are trying to do here but it’s too much. There’s a middle ground here where you will get the data you need and that’s better for sales. Let’s find it together.”

2

Knowing tech inside out

When it comes to making manual tasks faster and more streamlined, technology is king. But which tech? CRM, project management, time-management tools; there’s always something new in the market—or a new version of something. Sales Ops excels at the research that is needed to make a worthwhile investment. Your sales ops people have a deep understanding of everything the tool will be required to do, where it will be expected to function and what current systems it will need to work with.

3

Creating efficient processes

Your sales operations team carries out and expedites the VP of sales’ strategic plans, including developing, streamlining and continuously enhancing the sales process. Sales Ops keeps meticulous records and documentation, ensuring that best practices are observed in the long term, independent of turnover.

4

Getting ahead of big problems

Sales Ops is a many-eyed creature, keeping one each on the present, the immediate future, the near future and the long term. If sales reps are fixated on immediate goals, the sales ops people know when to fight the battle to follow process. For example, Sales Ops will chase down signatures required to close a deal or get clarity on questionable expenses so the effects of not doing it doesn’t snowball into a major issue—with associated costs—down the road.

⁴ An. “State of Inbound 2018.”

Turbocharging Your Sales Department

Inner circle

Sales Ops can and should play a major role in onboarding your inside sales team. In fact, they should drive it. Consider that ramping up new hires can take as long as nine months.⁵ That's the better part of a year gone before your new employees start bringing in money, and that's if they stay. Long ramp-up periods tend to contribute to the high rate of attrition in sales.

Majorly contributing to this problem? Too frequently, onboarding is conducted by trainers who do not understand sales, when ideally it should be conducted by someone intimately

familiar with—and passionate about—your USP, your product or services, your customers and their pain points. In other words, someone with a firm handle on sales processes and tools. Someone like... you guessed it: sales operations.

⁵ Kelly, Robert. "Onboarding's impact on Sales Productivity." Salesforce.com. Accessed June 28, 2018. <https://www.salesforce.com/blog/2015/03/onboardings-impact-sales-productivity-cso-gp.html>



Easing Interdepartmental Collaboration



One of sales operations' underappreciated talents is the ability to speak everyone's language, understand everyone's pain points, and respect everyone's goals. 'Everyone' meaning any aspect that touches sales, which includes nearly all functions within the company as well as suppliers, partners and customers. Steering the various functions and stakeholders through conflicts and aligning priorities not only saves time, it prevents costly oversights and mistakes that unnecessarily cut into your organization's bottom line.

Easing Interdepartmental Collaboration

While this section could fill a paper in itself, let's look at some examples of how and when your sales ops function may intercede with your company's:

Accounting department

As you can imagine, conflict in this area revolves around paperwork, to the time and effort that it takes to enable accounting to keep proper records. While we've seen that Sales Ops will step in when paperwork is pointlessly excessive, they also take into account that some formalities are there for a reason.

Maybe obtaining a signature from a new customer is all it takes for a sales rep's eyes to swivel to the next prospect. Sales ops gets that if a sale "isn't properly recorded it can't be billed. And if it can't be billed we can't get paid. And if the details and paperwork aren't accurate, at the very least payment will be held up and the client may even demand a credit."⁶

Sales Ops will make sure that when a sales rep has "closed the deal", it means the accounting function has the POs, the signed contracts, the W 9 form and everything else they need so nothing is stalling the flow of money coming in.

Marketing function

"... companies with aligned marketing and sales teams saw a 38% higher sales win rate and 36% higher retention rate."⁷

And as we've seen aligning is something Sales Ops does remarkably well. But it's more than that. Again, it's stepping in when it's likely that there is something your busy sales team may have overlooked. For example, say that one of your sales reps is speaking at an event. Someone has to ask—with enough advanced notice to get their presentation finalized—"what do you need for your slides?"

That person is going to be from your sales ops team and that is the same person who is going to follow up on all requests with marketing, ensuring that everything is where it is supposed to be on the day of the event.

⁶ Haden, Jeff. "How to Eliminate the Age-Old Conflict Between Sales & Accounting." *Inc.* January 11, 2013. Accessed June 15, 2018. <https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/how-to-eliminate-the-age-old-conflict-between-sales-and-accounting-fri.html>

⁷ Stoyka, Matt. "The Solution to Conflict Between Marketing and Sales? A Clearly Defined Process." *Business.com*, April 26, 2018. Accessed June 12, 2019. <https://www.business.com/articles/solution-sales-marketing-conflict/>

Easing Interdepartmental Collaboration

IT function

Sales Ops becomes the go-to function when IT needs to understand frantic and not necessarily clear requests from sales—“What do they mean when they say they can’t access this tool? What do they mean when they say the numbers weren’t saved?” This all goes back to efficiency, making sure that anything that is slowing down your sales team can be taken care of as soon as possible.

More than that, your sales ops team works with IT to ensure that new sales hires are ready at the gate. For example, say you have a new employee coming on board. He will be working in San Diego and he needs his laptop sent from your office in Boston. To avoid a situation where your new seller can’t actually use his laptop (or start working) until IT walks him through the process of installing programs remotely, sales ops will ensure that IT installs all tools before they ship it out.



And all the rest

“...contract management—including the creation, negotiation and approval of contracts—contributed to a whopping 18% of an enterprise’s sales cycle. And of the companies surveyed, a one-day slowdown of the sales cycle equated to a loss of \$80,000 on average.”⁸

So, it’s keeping the legal team happy but in check, reigning them in when they want to implement a contract approval process that will slow down the sales cycle by six weeks. It’s making certain that if salespeople want to get flexible with a license agreement or a new SLA, they’ve run changes by legal first. It’s figuring out how to accelerate a proof of concept. It’s working with the shipping department to make sure things arrive on time. It’s making sure that your road warriors who are traveling 80% of the time anyway alert HR when those four days away are a holiday rather than a business trip.

In short, it’s about finding that win-win, which often boils down to reminding different teams that everyone is, in fact, working towards the same greater goal. Ultimately, the success of sales is what ensures the success of the company.

⁸ Vibhaker, Vishal. “How Legal Can Slow Down the Sales Cycle and What You Can Do About It.” *Upcounsel Blog*. Accessed June 23, 2018. <https://www.upcounsel.com/blog/how-legal-can-slow-down-the-sales-cycle-and-what-you-can-do-about-it>

Easing Interdepartmental Collaboration

As for the extended family...

Suppliers

Sales ops people build relationships with vendors so that when they need a favor, they get a favor. They will know someone at Marriot or Hilton. They will know guys at Apple and Microsoft. They will have contacts with airlines, telecom companies, printing companies and shipping companies. They will know your resellers. In short, they will have people they can call whenever they have a request that starts with “We need to push this through, how can we make this happen?”

Customers

There are times when your customers may want to speak to their salesperson. However, there are a hundred reasons why your sales rep may not immediately pick up the phone. When these calls come in, someone from Sales Ops is always there to pick up. They may not be able to solve the customer’s issue immediately, but they can make the customer feel heard. Often, something as simple as “I will get back to you in two hours with an answer or update” is enough to boost that all-important relationship.



What Should Your Sales Ops Team Look Like?



“Sales reps are most effective when they have the right amount of support staff, but exactly how much support staff does a company need, and how should it be structured? Call it a Goldilocks quandary: too little support, and your salespeople can’t do their jobs well; too much, and you’re wasting money. But get it just right and your sales efforts can drive productivity and growth.”⁹

There is no out-of-the-box sales operations department. With a team that will have such an impact on your company, why settle for anything but a perfect fit? The size and responsibilities of the team will depend on what your sales team needs. For example, if you have CRM, you will need someone with CRM experience. But with what level of expertise? Do you need someone who can run a report on Salesforce or do you need someone who is Salesforce certified? The answer to questions such as these will determine whether you get the right person for the job, as well as whether you spend or save an additional \$15-30k on their salary.

⁹ Viertler, Sprengel, Kuchler, and Ulrich. “In the Best Sales Teams, About Half of the People are in Support Roles.”

What Should Your Sales Ops Team Look Like?

The way to ensure you do get the perfect sales ops team for your company will be addressed at the end of this document. For now, let's start with an easier question:

What Does a Good Sales Operations Person Look Like?

Regardless of the size of your sales operations department, or the specific level of expertise you require, each person who makes up the team should have the following qualities.

Problem Solver

A good sales ops person is pivotal to solving the problems that form obstacles to generating revenue. This person is constantly on the lookout for anything that is slower or less efficient than it should be and finds a way to create solutions that give his team and your company a competitive advantage.

To take just one example: a common problem with RFPs is that each section of the document can take weeks to put together. That can add up to months by the time everyone has contributed their information. But what happens when you add a problem solver to the mix? Your sales ops person takes that RFP and breaks it up into bite-sized chunks. He distributes the pieces to the relevant departments and coordinates regular meetings to ensure the parts complement each other. The result is a full and cohesive RFP put together at a fraction of the usual time investment but with a higher chance of impressing and being successful.

Creative

Sometimes Sales Ops has to solve seemingly impossible problems. For example, one of your sales reps may have to attend an event in a city where all hotel rooms are sold out. With their innate "I'm going to get this done" mindset, your sales ops person will figure out a way to get that room in that city on those days, without it costing the company \$1,000 a night.

Proactive

A proper sales operations leader will not have to be told what to do because they will have already done it. As one sales ops manager explained: "If you need to tell me what to do, I'm not managing my own time or yours. I should be so independent that I should be telling you what I need you to do."

Background in Sales

To do their job, your sales operations people have to understand sales. Those who don't can end up focusing on things that may not be relevant, which, of course, subtracts rather than adds value. Many of the best sales ops professionals have been sales reps at some point in their lives. They understand the challenges of the team and know how to push the sales function to exceed their goals.

"The right person to lead sales operations is someone who respects both the analysis/design and the process/detail mindset, who can envision the business and technology future, and who can work with leaders across the organization, as well as with external partners, to enable ongoing sales force success." ¹⁰

¹⁰ Zoltners. "Why Sales Ops is so Hard to Get Right."



Where to Start?

Having read this paper already sets you apart from most CEOs and business leaders. Unfortunately, many executives still do not fully appreciate the value that a mature sales ops function can deliver, whether they have one in their company or not. Surprisingly, some don't even feel it's a CEO's purview to know.

They are wrong.

The creation of a mature sales operations team has such a far-reaching impact over an organization's performance and revenues that it can often only go smoothly when the seal of approval comes from the top. If this is a completely new function, and unless you have someone on staff able to create a sales operations team that perfectly fits your company's needs, you will likely have to bring in experts to make sure all is done right the first time. Experienced advisors who will:

Help you determine whether you need someone who can build processes or maintain processes you have in place

Put together job descriptions to ensure you get the right people

Advise on KPIs and compensation packages

Expert advice would also allow you to quickly install a solid sales operations function, which brings your teams together to close deals faster, make customers happier, and improve your sales revenues.



Ensure the Success of Your Sales Ops Team

Whether to create a new sales operations team or give a boost to your existing department, our expert advisors are here to help. Contact our team to find out how you can achieve more manageable, more repeatable, and exponentially more profitable sales as you grow.

Call SFE Partners at **(781) 460-2100** or visit us at **sfepartners.com**.

About SFE Partners

Headquartered in Boston, MA, SFE Partners is the leading advisory firm for business leaders. From structuring the sales organization to defining core processes, selecting the right tools, and setting measurable and achievable goals, our approach is designed to install and motivate a growth-minded sales team. We offer a full range of sales services for go-to-market, scaling, M&A, and new product launches. More than 250 companies from around the world have chosen us for their sales consulting and outsourcing needs.



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